

The Culture in Your Cooperative?

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Every firm, both cooperative and investor-owned has a culture. Culture is one of those hard to define dimensions that determine how a cooperatives leaders, employees and members interact. Culture does not emerge at a point in time but rather develops organically over time from the cumulative decisions of the cooperative leaders and the traits and actions of the employees. A cooperative's culture is reflected in member participation, office setup, employee attitude and turnover, hiring decisions, member satisfaction and almost every other aspect of operations.

Some decisions and structure directly impact culture. Organizing staff around geographical locations as opposed to operational functions creates a different culture. Committing to cross training and job rotation impacts culture as does a policy for a strong preference to promote from within. Many aspects of culture are not good or bad in themselves; the question is whether they are the right fit for the particular cooperative.

Some aspects of culture relate to leadership and strategy. Some cooperatives have a culture of participating in industry events and education. Others tend to stay more internally focused. Some cooperatives have a culture of being early adopters and having their toe in the next new opportunity. Another cooperative may have a culture of being cautious and stable.

There are also dimensions of culture that are unique to the cooperative firm. Attendance at the annual meeting, voting and even the structure of the annual meeting are somewhat cultural. Collectively, they help form the culture of "member-controlled". Some cooperatives have a culture of competitive board elections while in others it is somewhat unusual to run against an incumbent. Cooperatives differ in their interaction with other cooperative firms. Each cooperative creates their culture of "cooperation between cooperatives".

The culture of your cooperative would be great topic to discuss at your next strategic planning retreat. It's important to consider how you view your culture. While culture evolves over time, the board and CEO can impact culture. I discuss who establishes culture in my next newsletter.